

Patraisha's Story

A Call To Islam Research *Exclusive*

Some people say truth is stranger than fiction. Could this explain why a 60 year old English Christian woman would choose to revert to Islam?

I was brought up in the Church of England. Baptised at three months old and confirmed at 17. Being the only member of my family to attend church I am quite used to being considered the odd one out.

Despite my beliefs my lifestyle was far from perfect. 'The long and winding road' would have been a far better description of my life than 'the straight and narrow'. Yet I still carried on going to church. Using being a recipient of "God's Riches at Christ's Expense" as my excuse for infidelity and hypocrisy.

During the 1990's I spent a year on a mission team in Northern Ireland and two years training to become a worship leader. In 1999 I married a man who was diagnosed as having Alzheimer's Disease within a few weeks of the ceremony. I spent six years in a non-marriage, regarding looking after my husband as God's purpose for my life. Taking him to live in my home town in England.

Over the years I gained various positions of responsibility within the church. Occasionally attending meetings of the local group of the Council for Christians and Jews. It was at one of these that I gained an interest in Islam. The speaker was an Imam from one of our local mosques. As I had always believed that Judaism, Christianity and Islam stem from Abrahamic roots I wanted to hear another side of the story.

The thing that struck me most about his talk was the respectful way he spoke about ALL OF THE PROPHETS. It amazed me that he used the term 'Peace Be Upon Him' every time he mentioned Jesus or Moses. Whereas I showed them no more respect in general conversation than I would my brother or my best friend. Two terms I was happy to use when thinking or talking about Jesus anyway. As a result of this talk I decided to read the Koran.

I found it interesting and managed to finish it. In one respect it seemed a logical sequel to the Bible and in another it raised more questions in my mind than answers.

It seemed so logical that it felt like a trap that had been set to lead me away from Christianity so I put it to one side.

Caring for someone with Alzheimer's Disease is not an easy task and I had neither the time nor the inclination to look into the subject in greater depth. However, the doubts set in my mind were growing! Christmas seemed like an excuse for shops to make a small fortune rather than a time of worship. To see Easter eggs on display on New Year's Day got right up my nose. What had Christianity become - a giant marketing exercise? If so, what was the product? Questions such as 'What have fairy lights, and chocolate eggs got to do with the Christian faith?' began to rattle through my brain. Were these thoughts just the end product of the stressful life I was leading? Was I cracking up under the strain?

When my husband died in 2005 I took on extra responsibilities because I needed a new purpose in life. This didn't work, and I used grief as the excuse for my 'doubting Thomas' attitude!

I found praying really difficult and was unbelievably critical of church services. I'd read a book called Jesus Freaks and began to feel this was what the church had become. Where was God in all this? So many of the hymns, especially the modern ones, were so Jesus orientated that I felt God had been pushed to one side.

It wasn't until I met a Moroccan gentleman who had recently moved into the area that my interest in Islam developed further. Ahmed and I kept bumping in to each other at the bus stop. For several weeks we simply said "Hello and how are you today?" but slowly our conversations grew in length and depth.

One day he asked me to have coffee with him. He was quite taken aback by my response of "Sorry, I can't, because it's Ramadan. It would be rude to have coffee with you while you are fasting." He was surprised that I not only understood the principles of Ramadan but also knew when it was.

When Ramadan was over he repeated his offer and I accepted. We began having coffee together using the time to chat about our different traditions. Ahmed taught me about ritual washing, prayer times, and halaal food. Before long we began to pray together. I would sit and pray silently while he did the relevant Salahs, explaining them to me afterwards.

I knocked on his door to wish him a Happy New Year and he said he was going to Hajj the next day. Having wished him a safe journey I decided to put the month to good use by looking further into Islam.

My first step involved borrowing a copy of 'The Complete Idiot's Guide to Islam' from the library. I decided to read a few pages each morning in place of my Bible study. However, I found once I'd picked it up I couldn't put it down. It was amazingly God centred! So many things seemed to make sense yet it also made me ask myself even more questions. Such as the Trinity. If my 'one God' was made up of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit why did Jesus spend so much time in prayer? Was he talking to himself? On the eve of his death he is reported as saying "Thy will, not mine be done". If they were part of the same being surely their will would have been identical? Similarly, why did Jesus ask God to 'take this cup from me'. If the three were one would such an action not have been impossible?

I had actually forgotten that the Trinity is not mentioned in the Bible but is a term adopted by a committee in Nicea in the fifth Century of the Common Era. At the time and place where various documents were put together, and some discarded, to make up the Bible.

Another question: Why are there so many variations of the Bible? I owned and used five different versions. This brought to mind a memory from the 1990s. In a training session I needed a copy of the Apocrypha which can only be found in the Jerusalem Bible. When attempting to buy a copy of this in three of the Christian bookshops in the town centre I couldn't understand the dirty looks and sharp responses I received. Until someone said "We don't sell that in here, you need the bookshop in Chapel Lane."

There I was to find out what my faus pax had been. I had been trying to buy a Roman Catholic Bible in Protestant bookshops in the City of Belfast. Silly me!

Having read The Idiot's Guide in about three weeks I decided to start reading the Koran again. Next my research led me to the Regent's Park mosque. Here I was bought a book on Doa by a complete stranger and the subject of the lady's training session was altered to cover some of the questions I had been asking myself. Brilliant example of Muslim selflessness.

I began to feel the contents of my wardrobe needed amending. Most of my clothes were a bit butch. Trouser suits, shirts, anoraks and jogging bottoms being the norm. I had been wearing pashminas for a few months so I decided to buy a couple of kaftans. My search for these took me to Luton market. Once again the friendliness and helpful approach of the people touched my heart strings. Nothing was too much trouble! They showed a genuine interest in me and were only too happy to answer my questions about Islam.

One of the ladies offered to take me to the local mosque. I must admit I was a bit sceptical at first but did go with her a few weeks later. This was after I had made my Shahadah, in front of two witnesses, in the dress shop.

Reversion is not an easy step for anyone to take. It is actually a way of offering ourselves to Allah for his service. A way of saying "Here I am Allah, use me wherever you can, and put me with whoever you choose. Not my will but yours be done."

For me it is a completely new way of life. One that is not easy. Taking time to pray five times a day, and trying to remember the rules of wudu are so different to the few minutes of Bible study and prayer I used to do. And I'm sure that learning to pray in Arabic is going to take a considerable amount of time.

One thing I know is how little I know.

Each day I repeatedly ask Allah to show me the straight path, knowing the route to it is likely to be the longest and steepest learning curve I have ever been on. But I'll get there one day, ensha Allah. Finding numerous friends and companions along the way.

Patraisha.

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